

Landscape and City during Fascism: Enrico del Debbio’s Foro Mussolini¹

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Abstract:

The launch of approximately forty design contests between 1925 and 1940 saw the involvement of various protagonists. They focused on very important topics and several different hypotheses of urban growth were put forward in an attempt to define a new urban concept. To fully understand the urban design of the Foro Mussolini we must remember that Del Debbio considered landscape and architecture as part of a larger urban environment. An important part of his urban philosophy was a planning system that could merge different scales of intervention and solve several outstanding issues. Del Debbio’s first overall plan drafted in 1928 already contained the main features of his architectural, landscape, and urban plan. He continued to work on it till 1933 when he finalised the plan which was in fact implemented, enlarging the extensive natural parkland. He started to work again on the Forum in 1938 when a decision was taken to locate the Palazzo Littorio in that area (in 1940 it became the Ministry of Foreign Affairs). His work continued until 1960 during which time he was involved in the new plans to prepare the Forum (renamed Foro Italico) for the upcoming XVII Olympic Games in 1960. Initially admired by contemporary critics, post-war ideological prejudices clouded judgement about the complex; as a result, it was banished from historical studies. Only the cultural atmosphere of the late sixties prompted a revision and reappraisal of Del Debbio’s work which is appreciated once again today.

Rome: a brief outline of the city

The launch of approximately forty design contests between 1925 and 1940, with roughly three taking place every year, saw the involvement of architects, engineers, institutions, critics, the

¹ A premise. I preferred to use the phrase *a city during the Fascist regime*, rather than *a city under a fascist dictatorship* or *a fascist city* because I believe that fascism in Italy never created a totalitarian state like Germany under Hitler or the Soviet Union under Stalin. Italy was an authoritarian State which gradually developed totalitarian tendencies. In other words, Fascism can be considered an imperfect dictatorship, even if in some ways it was totalitarian, for example there was only one political party and no free elections or free unions. See for instance Settembrini, *Fascismo, controrivoluzione imperfetta* and Gentile, *Fascismo. Storia e interpretazione*.

State, and the Governorship, which was established in 1926. The contests focused on very important topics such as the link between the urban development plan and architecture, stylistic changes in the relationship between architecture and the regime, and the use of competitions to plan tangible urban development.

The main institutions which used to achieve this goal were:

- 1) the *Istituto Case Popolari*, the privileged tool of the town planning policies of the Governorship supported by the *Associazione Artistica fra i Cultori di Architettura*;
- 2) the Ministries of Public Works, Post and Communications, Foreign Affairs, the Corporations, and Italian Africa, etc. All these ministries were involved in the construction of large-scale infrastructures;
- 3) other institutes also played an important role in urban transformation. They included the National Recreational Club, the National Fascist Public Welfare Institute, the Savings Bank, Universities, the Italian Fascist Youth Organisation, the *Ente EUR* and the Italian Soldiers Association (involved in the construction of new cities and rural development).

Several different urban development plans were put forward during the twenty years of the regime; the two which came up again and again were:

- a) a directional city along the north-south axis (Flaminia-Appia) or along the Tiber;
- b) a decentralised and unevenly distributed city spreading out in all directions with polycentric residential neighbourhoods located around social services (schools, post offices, sports centres, etc.).

One of the urban policies developed by the fascist regime for Rome was to build several monumental complexes with productive and cultural activities and residential areas, in short a functionally defined city. First came the “City of Medicine” (the General Hospital, under construction since the late nineteenth century) and the “City of the Sea” (Ostia Nuova, also founded at the end of the nineteenth century, but renamed “Lido di Roma” in 1933). Then in the twentieth century the “City of Studies” (the University, 1932-35), the “City of Films” (Cinecittà, 1936-37), the “Military City” and, finally, the “Representative City” (the E.42, later known as EUR, 1936-42). The E.42 was presented by Piacentini as the “natural conclusion of a design process inspired by the agora of Ancient Greece, and later the Renaissance and Baroque, representing a synthesis of the ‘Italic’ urban tradition.”²

² Guidoni 1987, 33



Rome, a brief outline of the City between 1925 and 1940: the design contests and the monumental complexes, namely the seven cities functionally defined by various activities.

Source: Drawing of the author.

An urban philosophy

When Piacentini talks about the agora he is referring to the Foro Mussolini by Enrico Del Debbio, the first “city” to be built for sports, an activity associated with the late nineteenth-century cult of the body which took on a whole new meaning during the regime.

To fully understand the urban design of the Foro Mussolini we must remember that Del Debbio considered the landscape and architecture as part of the larger urban environment. He believed in the complementary nature of architecture and town planning and the complex mix it creates between the reasons for the former and the functions of the latter. And indeed these became the basic ingredients of his figurative urban design strategy.³

³ Neri 2006, 72-79

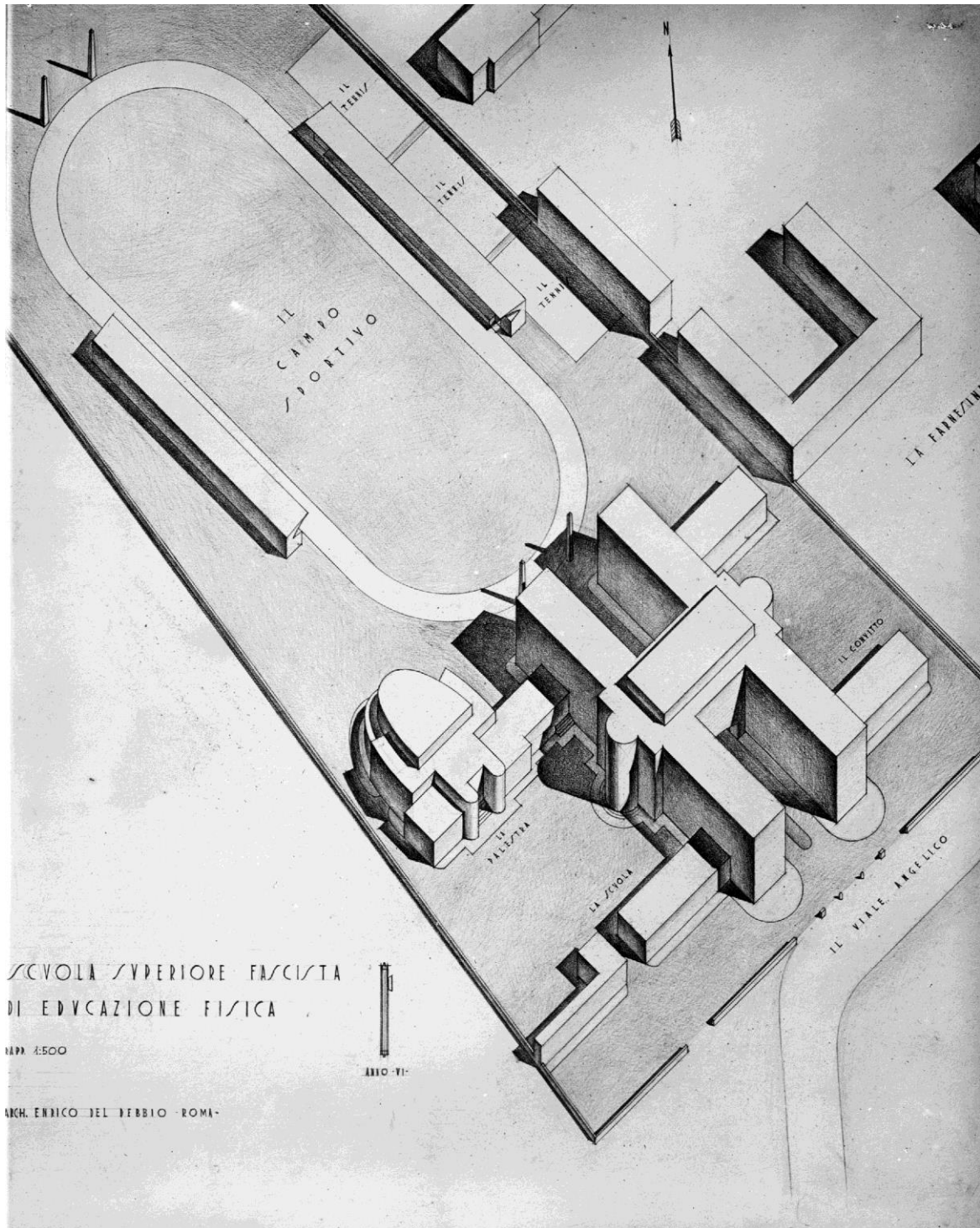
An important part of his urban philosophy was based on the theoretical principles developed by Gustavo Giovannoni. It involved a planning system which merged different scales of intervention: the overall urban system, its individual parts, and the figurative codes of so many different architectures. What was important was the overall choral result and not each individual idea. The *Foro Mussolini* can be considered the symbol of Del Debbio's landscape and architectural planning; he believed he could use the same theoretical principles of that project to transform other parts of the city.



The area of the Foro Mussolini before construction starts.

Source: Archivio fotografico Gigliola Del Debbio.

In short, he considered the city as an integrated organism in which attempts to preserve and maintain the landscape are linked to problems related to its protection. The latter is clearly visible in the semantic importance of the Foro Mussolini complex which, compared to many others, is characteristic of how he wanted to help enhance the natural environment. The redevelopment of the built environment and landscape in the area between Monte Mario and the Tiber was an all-embracing and extensive urban project designed to create a “City of Sports” to the north of the capital. Its construction was sponsored by the Italian Fascist Youth Organisation where Del Debbio held an important technical and artistic post for seven years from 1927 to 1933. In fact, his work on the Foro continued after the war and up until 1968.



Project of the Higher School of Physical Education and Sports field (1927-28), an axonometric view. Source: Archivio fotografico Gigliola Del Debbio.



The first building constructed: the Academy of Physical Education (1927-29) and the Sports Stadium, then Stadium of Marble (1928-32).

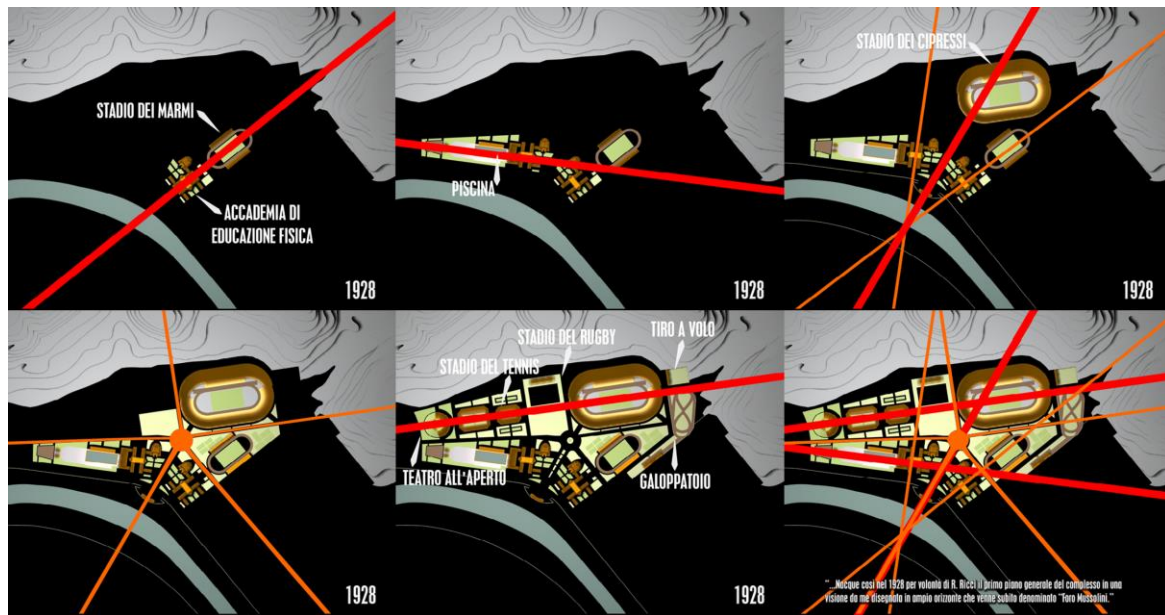
Source: Archivio fotografico Gigliola Del Debbio.

When work began on the Academy of Physical Education facility in February 1928, Del Debbio had already obtained approval for his project to build a large sports complex in the stunning natural surroundings of the Academy. This marked the start of the colossal urban and landscape project to build the sports complex, immediately named Foro Mussolini (now Foro Italico). Based on Del Debbio's pioneering and comprehensive design concept, the project for the Foro was well received by Renato Ricci, the new President of the Italian Fascist Youth Organisation. The repeated redrafts by Del Debbio between 1928 and 1933 effectively saved the natural parkland along the slopes of Monte Mario from a massive residential development programme which had been part of the detailed master plan originally envisaged for this area.

Del Debbio had several goals in mind when he drafted his plan:

- 1) to build an important national and international sports complex which, based on the concept of ancient *gymnasiums*, was to be a dynamic centre of physical exercise, a place in which to train the educators of the new generation of sports-persons;
- 2) to preserve a spectacular urban park about to be swallowed up by the growing urban sprawl;

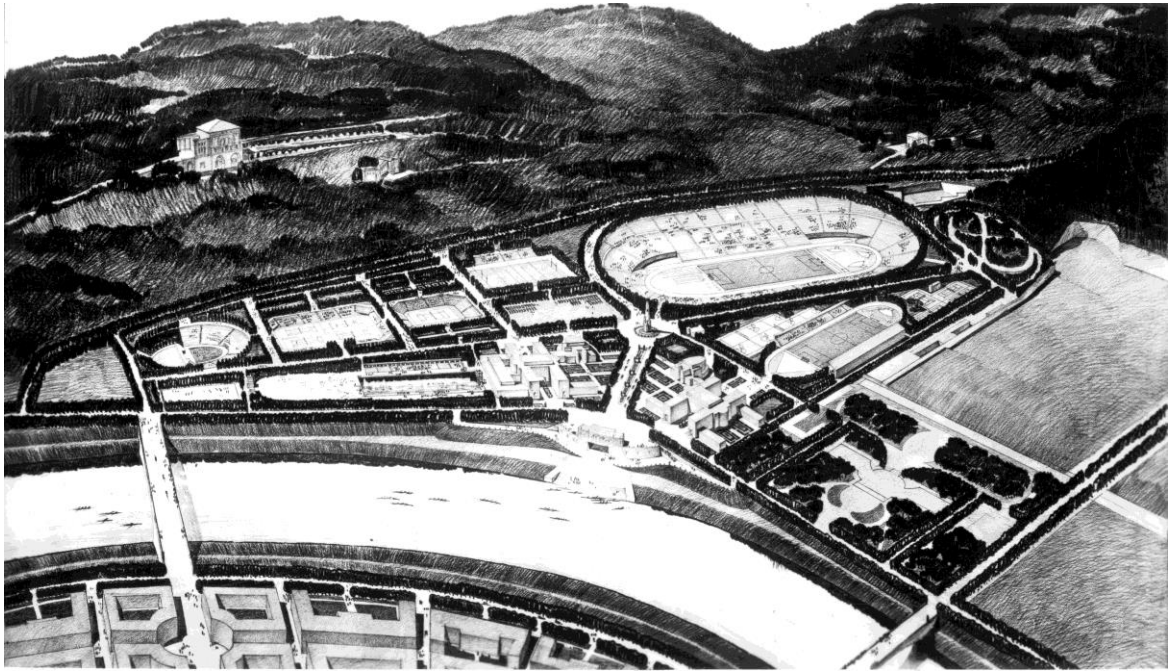
- 3) to solve the complex problem of the access to Rome from the north. This very difficult task had already been unsuccessfully addressed a hundred years earlier by Napoleon's government with projects by Valadier and other architects.



The urban design strategy: the conceptual idea and the visual/spatial system of the first Master plan for the Sports Forum, then Foro Mussolini (1928). Source: Elena Ippoliti, Eidolab. Dvd multimedia, in Neri, Maria Luisa. Enrico Del Debbio, 2006.

The urban design strategy

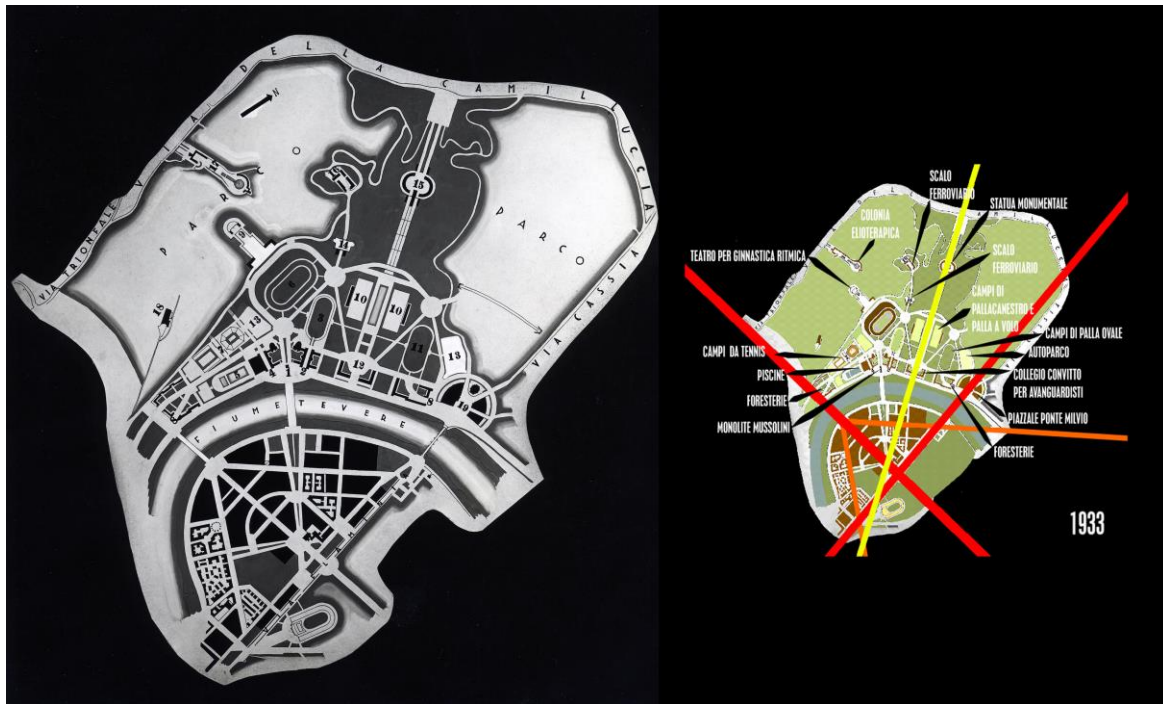
Del Debbio's first overall plan drafted in 1928 already contained the key features of the architectural, landscape, and urban design project he developed further in later drafts. The discreet and complex road system leading into the capital is based on two main axes: the Via Flaminia merging with Via Cassia at the Ponte Milvio square (the northern boundary of the city) and the visual/spatial route which differs from the old road axis and ideally links the old Roman bridge (Ponte Milvio) with St. Peter's and the Vatican. Del Debbio developed the smaller axial system of the sports complex based on his initial strategy of visual axes envisaged and adjusted to the overall urban scale. His strategy exploited visual centralisation and decentralisation, the addition and subtraction of buildings, the creation of a tree-lined connective tissue, and the colourful juxtaposition of red plaster and white marble.



*The first Master plan for the Foro Mussolini, a bird's eye view (1928).
Source: Archivio fotografico Gigliola Del Debbio.*



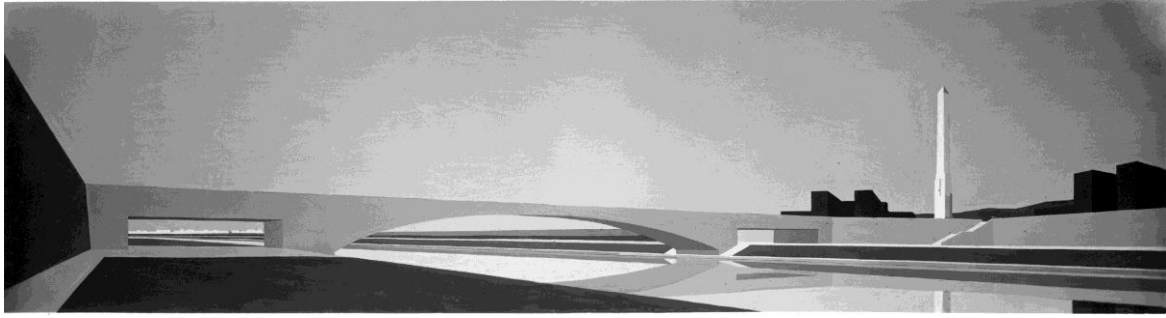
*The second Master Plan for the Foro Mussolini, a bird's eye view (1929).
Source: Archivio fotografico Gigliola Del Debbio.*



The executive Masterplan for the Foro Mussolini (1932-33), by side its conceptual idea and the used visual/spatial system.

Source: Archivio fotografico Gigliola Del Debbio; Elena Ippoliti, Eidolab. Dvd multimedia, in Neri, Maria Luisa. Enrico Del Debbio, 2006.

He gradually fine-tuned his project between 1928 and 1933. The project which was ultimately implemented involved enlarging the extensive natural parkland, extending the protected landscape area up to the Cassia, Camilluccia and Trionfale roads, and establishing how urban development would fit in with the rest of the city and its envisaged transformation into a polycentric system. The general redevelopment plan included the enchanted landscape between the bend in the Tiber just below Monte Mario, the Raphaelesque building called Villa Madama, and the visual hubs of St. Peter's and Ponte Milvio in the distance. He was careful to respect the environmental and historical importance of the area, as well as its extensive lush vegetation and typography of the land. The main design axis was particularly important in this landscape network, as enhanced by the new bridge and large square which, from the obelisk to the fountain of the sphere, was to act as the hub of the sports complex. By slightly opening the wings on either side of the enormous square, Del Debbio wanted to create the effect of a perspective vanishing point; this would provide greater depth and allow him to build an urban space which was to give an aesthetic and representative quality to the social role of sports.



A solution for the bridge leading to the Foro Mussolini (1932).

Source: Archivio fotografico Gigliola Del Debbio.

When designing the Foro, Del Debbio created a strong link between urban planning and architecture. He also affirmed several principles: respect for the *genius loci*, maximum visual depth, interpenetration with nature, spatial dilation, and maximum architectural transparency. He merges the natural and artificial environment in a landscape plan reminiscent of Roman and Greek models, such as Hadrian's Villa in Tivoli - the most remarkable example of that style. Del Debbio superimposes several axial grids on this magnificent natural setting and dynamically inserts these grids into the landscape using juxtaposed architectures devoid of any formalist features and with a limited colour palette. He adapts them to the geomorphology of the land so as to interfere as little as possible with the landscape.

This complex urban design is reminiscent of the classical origins of the city and of its continuity with humanist traditions, and yet it retains the modernity of a novel interpretation of architecture based on the thin red line binding Del Debbio to the classic style characteristic of Schinkel, the work of Mies van der Rohe, or Gropius' design for the Stadthalle on the Lehmanns-Felsen plateau in Halle.

On the left bank of the Tiber, Del Debbio's plan involved the entire bend of the river flanked by Via Flaminia. In fact he redesigned the built-up area and road network by connecting it to the Foro Mussolini, the city, and the sports fields at the foot of Monti Parioli. Del Debbio wanted to build the Fascist Youth Mother House in this area; he intended it to be a typological, architectural, and symbolic model for all the other Youth buildings in Italy. In his ideal design drafted in 1932 he combines the clarity of function and layout with the geometric logic of the 'cage' envelope, clearly illustrating the programmatic features of the architecture as an archetype to represent as many values as possible. In short, decoration in this archetype was an intrusive element. It is a raw unprocessed architecture, completely bare and without any aesthetics; an architecture which heralds more formal and figurative solutions.

Del Debbio experimented with the same figurative "decanting" in 1934 when he built the Heliotherapy Holiday Camp at the top of one of the Monte Mario hills behind the Foro Mussolini. The camp nestling in the mountainside was designed to face the path of the sun and was built so that its young guests could enjoy outdoor life; its long, curvy form adapts to the topography of the land to such an extent that the landscape acts as camouflage, making it look like a white contour line. Here nature and architecture are combined in unison.

While working at the Foro, Del Debbio developed other projects which, however, were never realized. After Moretti's design proposal for the new master plan of the Foro was rejected, Starace, the secretary of the National Fascist Party (which had incorporated the Italian Fascist Youth Organisation), decided in 1938 that the Foro was the perfect site for the Palazzo Littorio. His decision was contrary to the reservations expressed by the winners of the contest held the previous year – Del Debbio, Foschini and Morpurgo – and the fact they preferred another site. Work began in 1938 and continued until 1959; many changes were made to the original design because a decision had been made in the meantime (between 1939 and 1940) to use it as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁴

From the mid-fifties to the mid-sixties, Del Debbio was involved in developing new plans and new buildings in the area destined to be used during the 1960 Olympic Games. In 1956 he developed the “Plan of the Roads, Gardens and Facilities” for the Foro. That same year, together with Vitellozzi, he built the swimming pool stadium in line with the approach he adopted in his original master plan. Together with Lugli, he built the International Youth Hostel between 1958 and 1960 which was located between the Tiber and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Ten years later, in 1968, he again worked on the area in front of the Ministry; it was here that he designed and built the fountain with the “Sphere” by Arnaldo Pomodoro. This was the last project he designed during his thirty-year involvement with the Foro.

The image of the Foro Mussolini in Europe

In the magazine “*Architettura*” Piacentini had this to say about the Foro Mussolini: “A complex and grandiose architecture such as the Foro Mussolini cannot be considered in isolation, without its surroundings. First and foremost we have to mention how important its location is in the city, and then place it in the stunning landscape that acts as a backdrop.

In fact, no other site in Rome could provide as perfect a natural setting as the hilly valley of Monte Mario where Villa Madama stands as a solitary witness to art in the midst of the silence of the woods where thick and pristine vegetation is reminiscent of the backdrops which in classical antiquity were chosen to circle and surround theatres and stadiums.”⁵

⁴ *Il Palazzo della Farnesina al Foro Italico* 2008

⁵ Piacentini 1933, 65



*Master plan for the Foro Italico (1956-60).
Source: Archivio fotografico Gigliola Del Debbio.*

This was the description he used to portray the first group of works built at the Foro Mussolini – the Academy of Physical Education, the Stadium of Marble Statues, the Stadium of Cypress Trees and the Obelisk. Building began on February 5, 1928 and the inauguration ceremony was held on November 4, 1932. The Foro Mussolini was immediately admired by contemporary Italian and foreign critics, both traditionalist or modernist. Even Bardi, who visited the worksite in 1929, was favourably impressed.

In Italy, the Foro was displayed at the V Triennale in Milan in 1933. People appreciated the Foro because it showed that the Italians had learnt the lesson imparted by Europe; to filter the innovative parts and merge them with Italian traditions. In other words, the Italians had incorporated international features into their own national urban and architectural design. Pica

chose this design to illustrate Italian architecture at the International Exposition in Paris in 1937, and it's not surprising that in France it's one of the most admired buildings in Rome.

One interesting episode involves the Hungarians who were very impressed with the Foro Mussolini. In between the two world wars, at the height of the fascist era, the two nations discovered they had common interests and began to exchange information about urban planning and architecture. In fact, the magazine "*Tér és Forma*", directed by Bierbauer, introduced readers to architectural culture in Italy. When the XII International Congress of Architecture was held in Budapest in 1930, Bierbauer organised an exhibition of architectural works built by the twenty European and non-European countries participating in the Congress. The Italian section became one of its major attractions, so much so that afterwards a group of Hungarian architects spent three months in Italy visiting its cities.

The Hungarian architects published their impressions in several languages in a monographic issue of "*Architectura*", in particular in the article entitled *Impressions of Italy. Construction of the "Foro Mussolini"*⁶. In Rome, "a world where modernity cannot be eternal, or untouched by history",⁷ the Hungarians appreciated Del Debbio's design; they credited him with merging the values of science and art to produce beauty. There is a strikingly similar sport complex which was built during the totalitarian regime in Hungary which to this day lies abandoned.

Likewise, Marconi, for example, pointed out that the Sports Complex in Berlin designed by Werner March (1934-1936) is similar to the Foro Mussolini. In fact, it was indeed very similar to the grandiose works either being or already built in Rome during that period.⁸ Even the United States Ambassador in Rome expressed his appreciation for the complex in 1936.

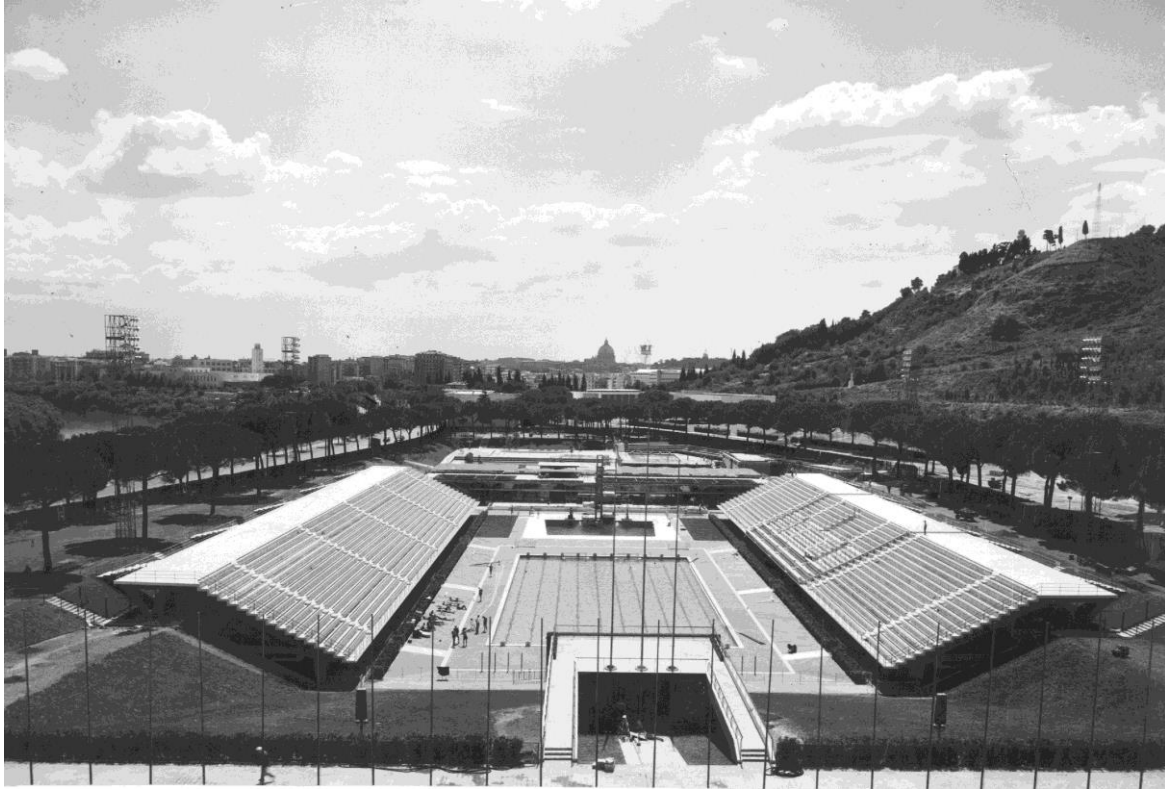
For many years after the war the complex fell into oblivion due to judgements clouded by a mix of ideological prejudice and architectural styles. However, Piacentini defined the Foro Italico (its current name) in the fifties as the most important urban work built during that period, as well as the most unique complex in contemporary Rome - Contrary to this, Bruno Zevi had a radically different view of the Foro Mussolini. Zevi defined it a work "packed with arrogant and pretentious rhetoric"⁹. We should not forget that Zevi was responsible for the historiographic "vulgate" of the regime's architecture. In this atmosphere which set friends against enemies, rationalists against academics, modernists against conservatives, this historiography was no longer capable of assimilating and explaining the complexities of Italian architecture built during that period, nor the work performed by leading contemporary architects to modernise it and much less to correctly describe the works and place them in context.

⁶ "Anthologie de l'architecture" 1930, XVIII-XXIV

⁷ "Anthologie de l'architecture" 1930, XVIII

⁸ Marconi 1936, 465-486

⁹ Zevi 1955, 240



The Swimming Stadium built along the visual axis toward the dome of St. Peter (1956).

Source: Archivio fotografico Gigliola Del Debbio.

Only towards the end of the sixties did a less ideological approach to the works built during the twenty years of the fascist regime begin to appear. Foreigners and more objective and sensitive critics and architects started to reassess these works and the importance of this particular urban project - This was especially true in the nineties when a more sophisticated and sensitive interpretation was provided. In fact, in 1991 the architect Berarducci called it a masterful design and had the following to say about it:

“I’ve begun to understand this architecture after a series of what Walter Benjamin would call rather ‘distracted’ observations. Several considerations inevitably lead to the stratification of much more profound cognitive understanding. [...] for this kind of work even the freest person would have used the emphasis and rhetoric everyone used – Moretti is no exception. On the contrary, the Foro has a female elegance, agility and *charme*, a concept which is impossible to decipher, but it exists and involves wit and refinement. For example, although it’s always wrong to compare an architecture with a pictorial work, if I were to make a comparison the name that springs to mind is Raoul Dufy; his art appears not to involve suffering or commitment, in other words it looks as if there’s no commitment. In actual fact, it requires incredible talent. Dufy used to pick up a piece of paper or a canvas and smudge it; with two or three elements he used to create a delightful painting and give transparency, depth and relief to his figures which he drew with short, rapid and accurate strokes.

This is what strikes me most in Del Debbio’s work, this enormous divergence between a design which is intended to represent something – the Obelisk in honour of Mussolini, the axial layout, an object here and there – and a building which is instead the symbol of *charme*, lightness, grace,

nothingness, of something made out of thin air. For example, the fact he used plaster rather than bricks to portray the colour red makes everything very metaphysical: in other words, the colour red contrasts with the white and becomes a metaphysical act.”¹⁰

Today, the most thoughtful and conscientious international critics are very positive in the evaluation of the Foro Mussolini; they judge it to be an extremely important work due its timeless spirit and the masterful and magnificent way in which it is nestled into the landscape. In fact it is published in many important books and displayed in several exhibitions.¹¹



Aerial view of the Foro Italico in 1959. Source: Archivio fotografico Gigliola Del Debbio.

Translation by Erika Young, revised by Karl Eckert

¹⁰ “Un architetto legge un’opera di Del Debbio” 2006, 421

¹¹ “*Kunst und Diktatur. Architektur, Bildhauerei und Malerei in Österreich, Deutschland, Italien und Sowjetunion. 1922-1956*”, Künstlerhaus, Wien, 1994; “Art and Power. Europe under the dictators. 1930-45”, Hayward Gallery, London, 1995; “At the end of the Century. One Hundred years of Architecture”, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1998.

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